

Joseph F. Clunk

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in industry

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EMPLOYMENT OF BLIND WORKERS IN INDUSTRY

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Recent experiments in the employment of the blind in both this country and Great Britain reveal that blind workers are employable in a wide variety of peacetime occupations and that their productivity often exceeds that of sighted persons. A British investigation by Fenelon found blind persons efficiently engaged in an astonishing variety of jobs, ranging from assembly work and inspection to the operation of machine tools. This article explores some of the possibilities for use of blind workers and points out the advantages which their employment offers industry.

It is estimated that during the war approximately 5,000 blind men and women were employed in production industries of all types. This increase in numbers from a prewar figure of approximately 200 has given many persons the impression that blind labor in production industry is one of the results of the war. There is evidence in the files of agencies serving the blind, however, which indicates that blind persons were employed in production industries as early as 1907, and the employment of blind persons was a well-accepted idea during World War I. In 1920 there were about 115 blind persons employed in approximately 55 plants in a mid-western city, and one large eastern manufacturer had 55 blind workers in one plant. Thus while World War II revived interest and activity in this program, it did not originate it.

After VJ-Day, a number of blind workers were released because of the termination of war contracts, and some employers reverted to their prewar tendency to ignore the blind as a potential labor supply—despite the fact that they had been able to use blind workers as examples to their sighted employees of dependability, loyalty, efficiency, and safety. However, industrial specialists employed by state agencies providing rehabilitation services to blind persons are gradually persuading employers to give blind workers a square deal in the consideration of their talents and abilities, and it is now estimated that the employment of blind persons has been restored to its wartime level and placed on a more permanent, practical basis.

WHAT JOBS ARE BEST?

During the war, many blind persons were employed as inspectors, machine operators, assemblers, and packers. While the wartime processes on munitions have been eliminated, similar processes are to be found in the production of peacetime merchandise. A drill press operates in the same manner when processing castings for pleasure cars as it does in drilling castings for jeeps, army trucks, or tanks. Laundry jobs are the same for civilian clothing as for military clothing. In fact the nation's entire production industry can be approached on this basis.

Frequently the question is asked, "What are the best jobs for blind persons in production industry?" There are no "best jobs" for blind workers in production industry any more than there are best jobs for any cross-section of the population. The blind persons of today are our sighted neighbors of yesterday, and the blind persons of tomorrow are our sighted neighbors and friends of today. Approximately 8,000 men and women of employable age, physical and mental condition, become blind each year. These persons would normally have continued at their regular occupations if sight had not been lost. They represent every social and intellectual level and all occupations. It is further estimated that approximately 2,000 of these persons are industrial workers, rejected as employees merely because the employer sees them as blind persons, overlooking their normal skills and abilities. Many of these persons were employed at industrial jobs which did not require the use of their eyes, and their sight served only to enable them to travel to and from the job inconspicuously and with ease. Thus had the employer analyzed the job requirements, he would have realized that sight was unnecessary and that his newly blinded worker could be continued without interruption.

Every production industry making finished or semi-finished merchandise has a considerable number of processes on which the only requirements for performance are manual dexterity, average intelligence, ordinary mechanical skill, and the desire to work. Possession of sight by the employee does not increase his efficiency, and loss of sight does not retard his learning ability, efficiency, or versatility. Moreover, proper analysis of plant jobs will disclose that a blind worker can be moved from one practical job to another with as much flexibility as can a sighted worker.

Thus the problem is not one of finding "the best jobs for blind persons as a group" but rather one of sorting out practical processes in any given type of industry and matching the blind worker individually to the job that best suits his particular capabilities. When there is a proper matching of individual and job, the blind worker learns the job in the same length of time as he would take to learn it if sighted; he achieves production at the same rate and frequently exceeds his own normal production because of greater concentration but not because of greater skill. If the blind person fails at a properly selected job, the failure is due to the same causes as would exist if that person were sighted.

SOME SUGGESTED OCCUPATIONS

A few of the many possibilities for the employment of blind persons in production industry may be found in the following examples:

Metal Trades.—Most types of vertical or horizontal drill presses on which either fixed or movable jigs are used, including single, multiple, and gang drill types; tapping, reaming, and counter sinking, many types of roll threading and cut threading; punch presses where the stampings are two feet square or less in area; many types of spot welders, grinders, milling machines, turret lathes, broachers, assembly of unit parts or the entire finished article, where the individual works either as a member of a team or alone.

Woodworking.—Feeding or delivering from circular saws; operating nailing machines or nailing by hand; operating sanding machines, joiners, mortises, tenoning; assembly of furniture or other wood articles; wrapping, packaging, or crating for shipment.

Candy.—Filling and emptying starch trays; feeding and delivering from enrobing machines; wrapping individual pieces; packing in stock boxes or in patterns for the retail trade.

Paper Boxes.—Corner cutting, scoring, bending stock, operating corner staying machines and ending machines.

Abattoir.—Linking and stuffing sausages and weiners; wrapping hams and bacon; feeding and delivering from labeling machines; packing canned products in wood or paper cartons.

ADVANTAGES TO INDUSTRY

When the jobs in any industry are analyzed, a fair number of processes will be found at which the blind worker can be employed on exactly the same basis as the sighted worker. Foremen and instructors are frequently surprised to find that a new blind employee is just as easy to instruct, and learns the job just as quickly as the average sighted person, and in many instances achieves the experienced rate of production in less time than the average sighted worker.

A young blind man was placed in a cement plant filling bags of cement with the standard type of equipment. The superintendent was amazed when the blind worker did not bump his head on the large storage tank at least four or five times during the first day, this being the usual experience of his sighted employees. The other four members of the loading crew were not only amazed but delighted when their new blind teammate increased the earnings of the entire crew by setting company records for production and filled more bags per hour than any sighted employee in the entire organization.

When it is indicated that preliminary basic training for industrial work is required by a blind person prior to placement in a particular type of industry, then the rehabilitation counselor of the state agency serving the blind provides the necessary basic training in a public, vocational, or private trade school.* Obviously, it is impossible to teach all processes in such schools, but the blind trainee is taught how to manipulate materials, to operate power equipment safely and efficiently, and to use various types of hand tools; and this basic skill is easily applied to the specific job upon which the person is placed. The state agency which provides such rehabilitation services does not place any blind person until the individual has had the full benefit of all necessary services. These include: a complete physical examination; ophthalmological examination; medical and surgical treatment if such treatment will reduce or eliminate any condition that interferes with employment; psychological tests to determine the skills, interests, and aptitudes of the individual; adjustment training when it is indicated that the blind person is not fully adjusted to his permanent condition; and basic vocational training as indicated previously.

When the rehabilitation counselor is fully informed as to the temperament and abilities of his blind client and has found a job in industry that is suited to him, then and only then is the employer requested to cooperate in providing a job for the blind worker.

Many employers hesitate to employ a blind person because they believe they will have difficulty either in finding a new job for him when changes in processes are required in their business or in dismissing him if at any time in the future he should become unsatisfactory. The services of the state rehabilitation counselor are always available to the employer if it is necessary to find another suitable job for the blind worker in the plant or to solve any personal problem endangering his employment. The employer should call upon the rehabilitation agency for this service in the same manner as he would call upon one of his own engineers or upon the manufacturer of equipment that he has purchased for use in his business. One personal objective of all blind persons is to be treated as normal individuals, and management and industry should not hesitate so to treat them.

CONCLUSION

A properly placed industrial blind worker is a morale-builder and a source of inspiration to his sighted associates. He stays on the job, is one of the safest employees in the plant, and in return for the opportunity to work reduces his employer's expense due to labor turnover, training, and supervision.

The state rehabilitation agency is usually located at the state capital and is known either as the State Commission for the Blind, Division for the Blind in the State Department of Public Welfare, or the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation in the State Department of Education. Local social agencies in every community are acquainted with the agency and can provide any industrial executive with information about it.

All States, the District of Columbia, Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico conduct vocational rehabilitation agencies in partnership with the Federal Security Agency's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for blind persons and those with other disabilities. Thirty-five of these States operate rehabilitation programs especially for the blind and visually handicapped. Employers may receive expert assistance in placing blind persons from any of these agencies. For information contact your State Commission (or other agency) for the Blind of your State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

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